

CHC2P Unit 2: 1920s-1930s: Growth and Sacrifice

Activity 2: Canada's Aboriginal People in the 1920s

Overview

In this activity, you will explore a number of important issues related to Aboriginal people in Canada in the 1920s.

Lesson

Tom Longboat



“I’m out of breath because I just came back from a run. I’m Tom Longboat, and in the years before the First World War, I was the best-known Canadian athlete in the world. Distance running was as popular as hockey or baseball in those days, and I was the best in my sport. In 1906, I outran a horse in a 12-mile race.”

“In 1907, I became a national hero, when I won the Boston Marathon and shattered the old record for the race. I was a shoo-in to win the gold medal at the London Olympics the next year. However, I collapsed in the heat before reaching the finish line. There were many rumours that I had been drugged. I’m not sure what happened, except that I got real dizzy and collapsed to the ground.”

“Yes, I won my share of trophies and honours, but I also faced tough times. I was born on the Six Nations Reserve outside of Brantford, Ontario. Like many Aboriginal children, I was forced to attend a residential school. This was a school away from my home, where I was made to learn the ways of white society. In the fourth grade, I ran away from the school, and that was as far as my education went. I think that some people took advantage of my lack of education and my trusting nature. My managers made decisions that were not always in my best interests.”

“After the Boston Marathon, the newspapers called me a ‘running sensation’ and the ‘Bronze Mercury’. I didn’t mind that so much, after all Mercury was the Greek god of speed, and I do have bronze skin. However, other nicknames made fun of my Indian heritage. When I first started running, I wore a used pair of bathing trunks and an old pair of shoes, and people made fun of my poverty. Later in my career, I had some difficulties with alcoholism, and again some people used this problem to stereotype my Aboriginal background.”

“In 1916, I voluntarily enlisted in the Canadian army for duty in the war overseas. I was used as a runner, delivering messages between various posts in the trenches. As you can imagine, it was a dangerous job. At one point, I was badly injured and pronounced dead. I recovered from the injuries, but my wife back in Canada heard I was dead and married another man. As I told you, I faced some tough times.”

“After the war, I returned to Canada and married another woman. I ran races for another 12 years, but I was never as good as before the war.”

“In 1929, I got a job with the City of Toronto in the street cleaning department, and that lasted me almost to the end of my life. For the last five years, I returned to the Six Nations reserve to practice the life and beliefs of the Iroquois Nation. Suffering from diabetes, I nonetheless died in a state of contentment at the age of 62, in 1949.

Residential Schools



Under the Indian Act, the Canadian government tried to supervise the Indian people - almost as if they were children. The government's long-term goal was to assimilate the Indian people. To assimilate means to make someone like everyone else.

To that end, the government forced many Aboriginal children to leave their reserve homes and to go to residential schools, sometimes thousands of kilometers from their homes in remote parts of Canada.

A residence is where you live, and a residential school is a place where you both live and learn. At the residential schools, the Aboriginal children were often forced to become like other Canadians in customs, language and viewpoints.

Often, the children had their hair cut short and were told not to speak their native language. They lost their native names and, in some instances, they were known only by a number. They were separated from their families for long periods of time. Some children were physically abused at the residential schools and today, many are suing the government for their mistreatment.

Government Promises

During the 1920s, the government aid that had been promised to the Aboriginal People in treaties was often reduced. First Nations peoples had the highest poverty rates, the highest suicide rates, and the highest unemployment rates in Canada. Aboriginal people were only allowed to vote in federal elections if they gave up their Indian status and became "ordinary citizens" of Canada. Status Indians finally received the right to vote in 1960.

Assignment

1. List three specific accomplishments made by Tom Longboat in his life.
2. Explain the meaning of the following terms:
 - Status Indian
 - Assimilation
 - Residential schools
3. List four problems faced by Canada's Aboriginal peoples in the 1920s.